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SUBJECT: FRENCH REACTIONS TO ETHIOPIAN POST-ELECTION PERIOD

REF: STATE 99185

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Paul J. Mailhot for reasons 1
.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Embassy Africa watcher discussed developments in Ethiopia with MFA AF DAS-equivalent Jean-Christophe Belliard June 6. Belliard recounted that he had recently discussed Ethiopia with NSC Africa Advisor Courville and UK FCO AF A/S-equivalent in London. During that meeting, he said, there was general agreement that, with the opposition claiming victory and the government engaged in cheating, there could be disorder not only in Addis, but also in the countryside, where people were, for the first time, daring to criticize the government. Belliard said that HMG had agreed to prepare a paper developing a common position of the witnesses to the Algiers accords, but had not yet done so. Belliard said he would be in touch with the British to remind them.

2. (C) Belliard said that, in addition to disorder, the second concern was that Isaias might see an opportunity to push for the recovery of Badme, leading to a new, catastrophic Ethiopia/Eritrea war. Belliard offered that Eritrea had more to lose in this situation, assessing that Ethiopia would drive the Eritreans "into the sea." Belliard recounted that UNSYG Annan had, at the May 29 conference on Darfur in Addis, stressed to the Ethiopian PM Meles the need to stop GFDRE efforts to manipulate the election results. Annan, he said, had also urged the opposition to remain calm and avoid violence.

3. (C) Belliard opined that the decision to delay the announcement of the election results by one month may not be a bad thing, giving both sides time to calm down. The question, he said, was whether the Election Commission would be able to manage a situation caught between the demands of the GFDRE to accelerate their work, and opposition demands to slow down. Belliard characterized the opposition's leadership as reasonable, and willing to play by the rules, but speculated that grass roots supporters might be less patient.

4. (C) We asked several times whether, beyond acting through the EU, France would be making any statement or engaging with the parties on a bilateral basis. Belliard avoided responding, but tacitly acknowledged that France would not be taking a high-profile position on Ethiopia. He told us that the MFA Africa directorate had been arguing against a proposed trip by former FM Barnier to make a policy speech on Africa in Addis, implying that, with Barnier now having left office, the trip was now a non-issue.

WOLFF